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The "Institution in the Mind"

REFLECTIONS ON THE RELATION OF PSYCHO-ANALYSIS
TO WORK WITH INSTITUTIONS

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THE "INSTITUTION IN THE MIND": Reflections on the relation of psycho-analysis to work with institutions.

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Hearsay has it that when the Chairman of the Professional Committee of the Tavistock Clinic some while ago read a paper at the Institute of Psycho-Analysis on the Psycho-analysis of Institutions, a distinguished Kleinian analyst tartly observed that there was no such thing. The concept was empty.

At first hearing one knows what she means. Psycho-analysis is rooted, in its concepts and methods, on what takes place between two people in a consulting room. It is, one may say, concerned with understanding the emotional experience contained or made present in that room. Its founder's genius lay in realising that this emotional experience, resonating and amplified through the medium of transference, opened a door to the understanding of mind. Opening this door promoted development, fundamentally in the inner world of the patient, though also of course in that of the analyst herself or himself. Melanie Klein's formidable contribution, as I see it, was greatly to enlarge and clarify the concept of the inner world, its contents and relations, as the focus of development. From this point of view it is not so much the relation of the patient to external reality as his or her relatedness to psychic reality *within*, which focuses analytic work, session by session, term after term.

When one shifts the focus of attention from the pair to the group, or the institution, or the society (if indeed there is an adequate referent for that term) the conditions which mark out psycho-analysis as a distinctive praxis - I mean a specific conjunction of theory and method rooted in an identifiable arena of observation - seem to evaporate. What one is left with can sometimes appear as little more than exercises in applied psycho-analysis. And applied psycho-analysis often does seem a suitable candidate for the appellation "empty". Even Freud's forays in this field tend to the wilder shores of speculation. I do not think there is anything necessarily misguided in speculation. But if speculation cannot find a way back to an arena of observable phenomena, it must remain at best a venture in more or less inspired diletantism.

To put this another way, psycho-analysis makes a difference because the arena in which observations are made is immediately present. The object of enquiry and the medium of enquiry are symbiotic. Too often in applied psycho-analysis the relation between the object of enquiry: art, religion, politics, organisational life *etc*, and the medium of enquiry: the experience of individual psycho-analysis, or the analysed mind, is parasitic, with the result that one or the other or both are robbed of their meaning.

What, then, is the arena of observable phenomena which can ground a psycho-analytic approach to the group, organisation, society? What is such an approach like, does it exist at all, and if it does, is "psycho-analytic" an appropriate adjective to describe it?

One answer, or at least partial answer, to these questions is ready to hand, within the Kleinian tradition itself. Which is why, at second hearing, the hearsay comment I started with seems strange and strained. This answer derives from Wilfred Bion's pre-analytic explorations of experiences in groups. Isabel Menzies has written that Mrs Klein herself showed little or no interest in this work, which she saw as a diversion from the central analytic task and method. Bion himself, once he embarked on his sustained probing of psycho-analytic thought and practice, only occasionally returned to group work, as it were on holiday.

But he never renounced that work, and in writing *Attention and Interpretation*, he explicitly gave it the sub-title: "A scientific approach to insight in psycho-analysis and groups". (Note "insight in psycho-analysis and groups", which implies something common to both but implicitly reserves "psycho-analysis" for its original setting: the interactions of the consulting room.)

Within *Attention and Interpretation* and again in the last volume of his psycho-analytic novel, *The Dawn of Oblivion*, Bion draws on a group vertex to illuminate mental processes in the individual, for example the various modes of relation between container and contained.

Clearly Bion thought that there was a link between his work with groups and his work with individual patients. What was the nature of this link? It was not I think that the former was an application of the latter any more than vice versa (although the theoretical chapter at the end of *Experiences in Groups*, written when Bion was deeply immersed in the Kleinian perspective, is something of a hostage to fortune in this respect). Rather the link lay in Bion's method of work and how he conceived of this method: namely, to go back again to the sub title of *Attention and Interpretation*, as a "scientific approach to insight".

At the heart of this approach was disciplined attention to the emotional experience that was present and presented. Emotional experience was the ground of in-sight as, for Bion, it was the ground for all formulations of thought.

Experiences in Groups can be read as a series of inspired reflections or musings on the emotional experiences presented in its author in the presence of groups. The formulations which Bion, more tentatively than his followers practice sometimes suggests, put forward in these papers - about group "mentality", the inter-relations of organisation, structure and culture, the distinction between work group and basic assumption group, and the tripartite differentiation of the latter (dependence, pairing, fight/flight), are grounded in these presented emotional experiences.

The point I want to stress here, though, is how very different this world is from the world of the consulting room. I do not think any of Bion's formulation in Experiences in Groups could have been predicted or derived from classical psycho-analytic practice or its so called applications. There is a tension between emotional experiences in these worlds which seems irreducible.

I want to suggest that this irreducibility needs to be valued and given its due. Furthermore that it is only by valuing this irreducibility that the conjunction between "psycho-analysis and the public sphere" can be fruitfully explored. At the heart of this conjunction, as I see it, is the link of method: attention to and interpretation of emotional experience.

There are difficulties with the term emotional experience. One difficulty is this. Ordinarily we tend to locate emotional experience in the individual, as if such experiences were matters of private ownership. Those of you familiar with groups meeting to study their own behaviour will recognise the irritation that a member or members often express at the use of the pronoun "we". "Speak for yourself, that's not what I feel, think, believe *etc*". One understands this irritation, indeed has felt it oneself. I am often nevertheless surprised at our readiness not to be equally irritated at the use of "I". As if one could be so sure not just of what one is feeling oneself, but also of the extent of one's participation or non-participation in the feelings of others.

I suggest that emotional experience is very rarely located within a purely individual space. Psycho-analysis for example is not the investigation of the emotional experience of the individual alone. It is the investigation of the emotional experience of the pair, of what passes or passages between them. The irreducibility of emotional experience in the worlds of individual analysis and group work is the irreducibility of one of these contexts or frames of experience and another.

The group setting brings into view different constellations of emotional experience and different mechanisms for dealing with these constellations, because in some sense in changing the object of attention it changes the subject as well. Bion's basic assumptions can all be seen as different ways of unconsciously resisting the threat, actual or potential, which this context poses to the boundary around the individual subject. The paradox is that these unconscious resistances or defences themselves annihilate that boundary.

To work analytically in groups, or I want to suggest in institutions, is to use one's alertness to the emotional experience presented in such settings as the medium for seeking to understand, formulate and interpret the relatedness of the individual to the group or the institution. It is understanding that relatedness, I believe, which liberates the energy to discover what working and being in the group or the institution can become.

As a necessarily partial attempt to illustrate something of what I mean I will take an incident from some recent work with a client who was the head of a fairly distinguished boarding school. I met this client at The Grubb Institute in a series of one to one, two hourly, consultations, using a method developed by my colleague Bruce Reed and known for short as Organisational Role Analysis. Such consultations are held at fortnightly intervals over a period of 4 to 6 months. The material for work is the client's experiences in his or her own working situation: his perceptions, feelings, thoughts, images, described behaviour or interactions with those he relates to day by day.

Although the consultations are one to one, I do not construe the client simply as an individual, but rather as a person-in-role in a system: the system being the "organisation" (in this case a school) seen as "activities with a boundary". Session by session the client brings in and offers experiences from his working context that are on his mind. I seek to understand these experiences as expressing the client's relatedness to the organisation, as saying something about the **organisation-in-his-mind**, not just metaphorically but literally. That is, I assume his experience is an aspect of, or a facet of, the emotional experience that is contained within the inner psychic space of the organisation and the interactions of its members - the space between.

Just as in psycho-analytic work, as I understand it, everything that takes place in the encounter between analyst and analysand is seen in relation to the transference, the gathering and interpretation of which is the primary task of the analytic session, so everything that takes place in these consultations is seen in relation to this assumption of an inner psychic space that is organisational and not just individual: the "workplace within", to use Larry Hirschorn's graphic phrase.

On this occasion, the third session with the client, on the way up to the room we met in, we exchanged apparently casual remarks about a storm the previous day. My client referred to the different ways people view the damage storms cause to the natural environment, depending on whether they live off the land or simply use it for recreation and pleasure. The conversation continued inside the consulting room, as my client told me a story about a recent interchange with his gardener.

He had met the gardener surveying a beautiful beech tree and saying rather glumly, "its got to come down. I'll get another to replace it". He remonstrated with him, pointing out that it was an old tree, it made the view, was it really necessary to chop it down *etc.* The gardener persisted. A week later he had chopped it down. It was pretty rotten inside. Also, once down, a different view opened up. It became possible to think about other changes to the layout of the garden.

Something about this story made me hesitate. I knew that the gardener was also the school gardener and that the head's house was within the school grounds. The theme of continuity and change had been one occasion for the head coming into these sessions from the start. He seemed to be poised between sensing a need for change to keep the school alive (not surviving, but lively, vital) and fear of destroying what was by all accounts a highly successful and predictable operation. The anecdote of the gardener and the tree seemed to me a way of formulating more exactly the situation the head believed he faced. Why should he tell it now? I did not know but thought I would risk mentioning what was going through my mind. The head then said that he had recently been thinking about a possible new organisational structure for the school. The occasion for this was the impending retirement of the Director of Studies who represented the old guard. He could either act now or an opportunity would be lost. He had been wondering how to broach this with senior staff, with an incoming Chair of Governors and with the powerful but reactionary old boy network, who never wanted or saw the need for anything to change.

The gardener had a picture of the garden-in-the-mind, not the same as the owner of the garden. He took a risk in acting on this picture, the risk of believing that if he did so the owner would see something new. The only authority he had for so doing was the authority of one who tended the garden, who had the garden in view rather than the owner. The story was a way of externalising and testing the head's own situation, of rehearsing what it might require to take authority as a person-in-role from his position in this school, now.

That is one way of looking at it. But it turned out not to be the only way. When the session was over I began to think that I had missed something. I had been implicitly treating the story as simply a metaphor for, a clue or probe to, the thought in the mind of the head.

But this ignored the fact that the story concerned the wisdom of the gardener, who was the school gardener, not simply the head's gardener as a private individual. Just as the head's house and garden were the schools, not his alone. From this point of view, the gardener could be seen as giving a formulation, it seemed to me, to a thought that was there, in the present emotional experience of this school. By appropriating the story as metaphor, by my colluding with, indeed encouraging, this appropriation, the emotional reality of the story in the life of the school was denied.

I then realised that this denial was itself an element in the head's relatedness to the school. That is, he had a tendency to see the school as over and against him rather than as in him. Hence a recurring difficulty he was experiencing in sharing with others the "thoughts" formulated in his mind. He experienced himself as in the school but not of the school, whereas the emotional reality was that the school was in him but not of him.

His apparent dilemma as head, which he also interpreted as a personal dilemma - should I leave or should I stay - was, I felt, a dilemma of the school or, to put it another way, the emotional experience of the school contained this dilemma as one of its factors. To be free to work creatively as head of the school meant to be able to formulate this dilemma, given to him by the gardener, as the thought that was there, and to find a way not of solving this dilemma himself but of giving it back to the school in a way which might liberate emotional energy in others, not in himself alone: energy to realise thought.

To realise thought, I suggest, is to receive, to formulate (give expression to) and give back something that is there, which is not of oneself alone, is not bounded by one's own physical or mental skin. It is a mental process which stands out and against a more familiar model of thought as made, an object of ownership: "my" thought, "your" thought, "our" thought.

From this point of view, one can circle back to and in turn mitigate what I said earlier about the irreducibility of emotional experience in the worlds of individual analysis and work with groups or organisations. Each can be seen as a different, distinct arena for the realisation of "thoughts". Thoughts emerge and only emerge from a matrix of

emotional experience. But there is no one such matrix. And each matrix - of the individual, the pair, the group, the organisation, the society - is probably characterised by a certain pattern and variety of resistances and defences. We should not be surprised, for example, that experience of psycho-analysis does not invariably seem to lead to effective collaboration in institutional arenas. Nor should we expect that psycho-analytic insight will resolve or reduce the tensions of social life. There is no privileged arena for the hard slog of insight, because there is no privileged arena for emotional experience itself. There are only the arenas there are, and the practice of insight in each.

It is that practice that links.

David Armstrong
November 1991

NOT TO BE CIRCULATED WITHOUT REFERENCE TO MR DAVID ARMSTRONG

Postscript (presented to the Consulting to Institutions Workshop at The Tavistock Clinic, 17 December 1991.)

Since first delivering this paper I have had occasion to be forcefully reminded ("re-minded") of the intricacy and interpenetration of emotional experience in institutional settings. I offer the following as an example of work in progress, which draws on and may further illustrate the concept of "institution-in-the-mind" as a working tool in organisational consultancy.

A colleague and myself at The Grubb Institute have been engaged on an assignment with a therapeutic community, which works with emotionally disturbed and damaged children and young people. The community has a long and distinguished history as a residential establishment. In recent years it has witnessed significant change, both externally and internally. The population of young children entering the community has shifted towards more seriously disturbed and damaged individuals, almost all of whom are now on 52 weeks a year care orders. Many are likely to spend all or most of their childhood within the community and will receive all or most of their education in the community's own school. The proportion of older children will be higher. Some are likely to remain there throughout their adolescent years and beyond.

The external context of the community has also changed in other ways. Contractual relations with local authorities have been and will be further influenced by the provisions of the Children Act and by the growing fashion for purchaser/provider models of service delivery. As with other human services, there is simultaneously a squeeze on resources and a public preoccupation with what happens in residential institutions, particularly with evidence of malpractice, abuse, neglect and incompetence.

Internally and in part as a response to these external factors, there has been a variety of structural changes; in the deployment of space and of people and in management posts and responsibilities. These structural changes have also been informed by a considered intention to enhance the autonomy and responsibility of the team managers, who head up and lead the individual units or houses. Autonomy and responsibility are wished for, on both sides as it were, but may also be seen, overtly and perhaps covertly, as a potential threat to the integrity of the community as a whole and its underlying ethos, both therapeutic and emotional or "spiritual".

Earlier this year, we were invited to submit proposals for working with the community at reviewing its current management structures and practice in the light of the various challenges and opportunities it was facing, and to make recommendations. Our own practice of consultancy

as an Institute is, however, to resist being placed as outside experts who come in, interview people, scrutinise documentation and procedures and then offer some organisational blueprint. Rather it is to work with the organisation and its management and leadership at understanding and analysing their working experience, in a way which can release and enable decision and action to be generated from within.

This model of consultancy, not without some reservations, was worked through and negotiated with representatives of the Council of the community, with the two Directors and with other members of senior management. In the summer we began working with the Directors, using the method of Organisational Role Analysis. The idea was subsequently to move out from this base to a broader pattern of work with other individuals and groups, including members of Council, senior managers, the team or unit managers and the community's panel of consultants. Each phase would be concluded by a summary position paper, discussed with a small steering committee, on the basis of which plans for the following phase would be finalised and agreed.

My colleague and I each worked individually with one of the two Directors for 4 two hour sessions, spread over two months. We then came together for a joint consultation with both Directors, to review and work further at what was emerging from the individual consultations, in relation to the Directors' picture, both of the Community and its structures and of their own role(s) and relations with others, including themselves.

A theme that had emerged from the individual consultations with the Directors, though it took on a different colouring with each, was that of "letting go". (It is important to note that this phrase was first introduced by the Directors themselves, not by the consultants.)

"Letting go" sometimes referred to an actual experience or feeling in the Director himself, that might be tinged with anxiety, and sometimes to what was felt to be a need or requirement of what the Directors and senior management generally were seeking to bring about: namely devolving more authority downwards.

For one Director, "letting go" also had another connotation, relating to his impending retirement. (The implications of this and in particular whether the concept of a dual Directorship was necessarily appropriate to leadership of the community, was one element in the initial consultancy brief the Directors and Council had drawn up.)

It soon became clear, however, that "letting go" and the cluster of emotional experiences associated with it, were more pervasive features in the community's life and work. For example, one dilemma in the community was this. A few years ago a decision had been taken to set up a separate unit for adolescents in the main physical block. Children from other houses would transfer to this new unit, when they reached 14 or 15. From the start the unit had been dogged by many difficulties:

around staffing, the behaviour of the children *etc*. Staff in other houses were reluctant to let "their" children go and enter this "difficult" new unit. Staff of the new unit in turn complained that only the more "difficult" children were being allowed to enter *ie*, they were being used as a dumping ground. Later, another unit had been set up, intended for a few older adolescents, which was to be run as an experimental venture in "semi-independent" living: a kind of preparation for and rehearsal of leaving the community for the world outside. Despite the fact that this unit was purpose built and attractively laid out, it had never so far been used.

"Letting go" and the conflicting ambivalent feelings surrounding it was, it seemed, a ground bass to the present emotional experience of this community. (A "ground bass" in the specific sense of providing support to an "harmonic superstructure that colours the movement of the parts above it."¹) The Directors' announcement and awareness of this theme in themselves was a reflection, or perhaps more substantially a literal representation of, the community within.

During the joint consultation with the Directors towards the end of the first phase of work, each returned to the experience of "letting go", in the context of reviewing where they now were in their thinking about their own roles. We, and later they, were struck by a new depressive undertow which coloured what they said and felt. This undertow had to do with feelings of "isolation", of "losing touch with the nuances of the social work aspects of the community", and of concern as to whether the philosophical nature of the community was still present and alive, vital, in the minds and practice of staff.

Associated with these feelings, as one Director put it, was a question as to whether the team managers in post had:

"sufficient awareness (and capacity) to hold the trust,
I feel we've lost something, something has weakened I
have a sense of separateness and isolation, which is covered up in
the language of letting go"

He went on to refer to "a gap, a space" between the Directors and the day to day work of the units. Subsequently, his colleague used the image of the Directors as "disconnected dinosaurs". That morning he had seen someone standing in the hall and realised he did not know who she was. In fact it turned out to be a speech therapist working in the community.

Other strands in this experience included the relation between the Community's past traditions, ethos and identity and its present and future needs.

It would have been possible to read this undertow of depression in terms of the Director's own wrestling with experiences of loss and mourning: at what they had had or were having to give up - direct "hands on" contact with staff and children; the accumulated symbols, traditions and rituals associated with the past, when the community had seemed more of a single, undivided whole; the closeness of their previous working relationship, when the dual Directorship had been very much a co-Directorship, without any formal differentiation or specialisation of function. Perhaps the impending retirement of one Director and the fact that his colleague was about to enter hospital for quite a serious operation, acted as a catalyst to such shared emotions.

I would not wish to deny this possibility. But to pursue it seemed at the time to risk missing something else. Just as, earlier, the theme of "letting go" appeared to embody a more pervasive experience of the community as a whole, might not these associated feelings of depression also be giving expression to a wider dynamic in the community's life.

A clue, I vaguely sensed, might lie in the language of a felt "gap or space".

This language resonated with something I happened to be reading at the time: a recently published book by a psychiatrist and psycho-analyst, Kenneth Wright, called *Vision and Separation*, which seeks to explore, through a combination of clinical observation and imaginative speculation, the origins and development of symbol formation and the sense of self. (I mention this not only because it is important to acknowledge the origin of one's own associations, but also because I believe that the role of chance, or dumb luck, in consultancy, as doubtless in clinical work generally, should not be ignored.)

Wright's argument is complex and I do not feel able to summarise it clearly. It turns essentially on relating successive phases of symbol formulation to shifts, first of all in the infant's relation to its first object, the mother: her breasts, face, arms, voice; through the stage of transitional phenomena as explored by Donald Winnicott; to the impact of the Oedipal situation, when the child faces the encounter with a third position - that of father in relation to mother - in which the gap or space between the child and its object is no longer bridgeable in the same immediate way, but only through the symbol, created or erected in the space between, which is also the space of the mind.

In recalling this argument, not in any precise way, I was not trying to make a direct link to what was surfacing in the interface with the Directors' experience in this consultation. What happened was rather that it brought into view a possible chain of connections between this experience and that of the community more generally.

First of all, it suggested or reminded me that a familiar feeling in relating to adolescents as a parent, is that quite suddenly one can become aware of a new and different "gap or space" between one's child and oneself, where it is the child that is creating the distance, or needing the distance, and not just the parent. What can sometimes be very disconcerting is that this need for distance may oscillate with a need or demand for closeness. It occurred to me that the Directors' reported experience in relation to staff had something of this quality about it. It was as if the Directors were functioning as parents of adolescent children, wanting to let go but disconcerted by and distrustful of the staff's own distancing, separation from them. I remembered that early on in the consultancy it had been mentioned that some 2 or 3 years previously, shortly after an Assistant Director had been appointed with overall responsibility for therapeutic care, she had referred to her impression of staff as adolescents. In an earlier session with one of the Directors, my colleague had also remarked that she felt filled up with an image of adolescent staff. She had tentatively suggested that the difficulty the community was experiencing in working with adolescents was because there was no place for them to be adolescents, since this place was usurped by the staff themselves.

That was one possible link. But another was this. Increasingly children entering the community, as noted earlier, come with experiences of major disturbance and/or abuse. For many of these children, the gap or space between themselves and their early caretakers has not evolved out of and within a normal good enough experience of mothering. That gap or space, one might say, is one of alienation not separation. For these children, the central therapeutic task of the community is initially to create the absent, lost or never found experience of being held, contained. Over time one might imagine, and now reinforced by the changes in intake, it is this task of holding that has driven the community culture. In the past, as this task was achieved, children would begin to move outside, have more contact with their families and/or through attendance at local schools. Perhaps this outside contact facilitated the achievement of a more soundly based experience of separation.

Now, however, separation or the achievement of separation is a task that only the community, through the patterns of relation between staff and children, can achieve. And this task has to be carried out in a context where the establishment of a holding relation is itself more difficult and more precarious. Small wonder then that so much ambivalence surrounds the experience of letting go, or the encounter with adolescence.

From this point of view, the Directors' experience could again be seen and understood as primary data of the "state of the system", which was **inside them** as they were inside it. Or rather, once named, not just as data, but as **information**: a difference that makes a difference. And this leads into the final point I want to make. I do not know whether the formulation of the emotional experience of this community, "presented" in the experience of the Directors, as I have tried to describe it here, is true, half true, or false. Certainly, aspects of it, fed back to the Directors, rang true. But the criteria of truth, finally, must lie with whether or not such a formulation, communicated, promotes development.

In this instance, since it is work in progress, I cannot say. I do not believe, however, that in this form of consultancy such a formulation, communicated, is more than the start of a process. Of course, as in psycho-analytic work, there is no such thing as a definitive formulation. All formulations are tentative: working hypotheses to be tested, which will in turn generate or reveal new and different "thoughts that are there". But I mean something more than this, which is to do with the movement from formulation to action.

Specifically, no such formulation or sequence of formulations can tell a client or show a client what to do. At best it can enhance or release the client's creative capacity to think through what to do. That thinking through moves from a concern with the **meaning** of what is to a concern with the **purpose** of what is, from culture to structure, rules to roles, actuality to intentionality. Nothing I have said should be taken to imply that I do not see these things as legitimate work with the client. I do. Indeed they are often the hardest work, when the tension between wanting to make a difference and recognising that only the client can make a difference, is most acute. True action, unlike behaviour, requires formulation. But equally, true formulation, unlike speculation, requires action: taking authority for what one knows, knowing that one may be proved wrong. Within organisational analysis, as I conceive it, one is always moving from the one to the other: formulation to action, action to formulation.

The link is the practice.

David Armstrong
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